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**Too hot to handle? A social semiotic analysis of touching in ‘*Bend it like Beckham*’**

This article examines the cinematic portrayal of touching and its politics in sports coaching, exploring how social interactions between coach and athlete are symbolically represented. The analysis focuses primarily on a well-known British-produced film, *Bend it like Beckham* (2002), in which scenes exhibit different forms of touching. The construction of intimate coach-athlete relationships captured through a series of filmed encounters is analysed through a social semiotic frame. This requires judgements about the authority, ‘reality-status’, and possibility of meaning arising from such representational practices. Attention is drawn to different moments of intimacy and/or sexual tension between the lead coach and central female characters, both on and off the pitch. Through a series of detailed interpretations, we show how the complexities involved in assigning intentionality in cinematic contexts serves both to assert and displace meaning. This further problematizes moral aspects of relations between coaches and athletes in tactile encounters, and especially so within the context of risk-averse safeguarding policies in sports coaching, a context characterised by increased prescription, proscription and disciplinary intervention during the years since the film was released.

**Introduction**

In a series of articles (Piper et al., 2012; 2013; Garratt et al., 2013; Garratt and Piper, 2014), relating to a recently completed ESRC project, *Hands off sports coaching: the politics of touch* (RES000-22-4156; Piper and Garratt, 2012), we discussed the practical impact and moral significance of safeguarding and child protection policy in

contemporary coaching practice. We argued that the wide, pervasive and moral crusader-led discourse of safeguarding and child protection has created a 'folk devil' and moral panic (Cohen, 1999; Piper, 2014), escalating fear among coaches and radically disturbing the role of the coach through the adoption of questionable defensive and self-protective practices (Taylor et al. 2014). This has corollary implications and often deleterious consequences for the development of sound intergenerational relationships between coach and athlete in youth sport and physical education, alongside collateral negative effects in adult sport. It is relevant here that in the UK young people from the age of 16 are able to make their own choices about their sexual partners, unless the other person is acting *in loco parentis*, for example as their teacher. In such situations regulations place any adult engaging in improper contact with one of their charges at risk of professional damage and in some cases prosecution. In recent decades this approach has been extended to a wider group of workers including sports coaches. Increasingly, sports have moved in this direction; coaches being given written and/or verbal guidelines by their clubs, prohibiting touching and personal relationships with young athletes (see Piper and Garratt 2012, for evidence). This means that regulations originally intended for children have become guidelines which increasingly apply to (usually) young adult women, even into their mid-20s (see McRae and Pendleton, 2012). These damaging trends are significant, especially given the influence of particular policy antecedents in relation to youth sport and contemporary coaching practice. Previously, adopting a Foucauldian genealogical approach (Foucault, 1991), we traced the social and historical formation of safeguarding policy and examined its pervasive influence in the wider social and political context in which contemporary practices of coaching have systematically emerged and discursively developed

(Garratt et al., 2013). However, while this analysis drew critical attention to the malign effect of policy *discourse* and *statements* upon the construction and configuration of coaching relations, regulations, and moral prohibitions, it did not specifically examine social semiotic activity; that is, *signs* through the interactions occurring between coach and athlete. By this we refer to the way in which semiotic resources (Jewitt and Oyamas, 2001) can be utilised to analyse the *potential* meanings deriving from social interaction, where such affordances (Gibson, 1979) exceed but do not exclude the written and/or spoken word. We are thus proposing a synergy that brings social semiotics into dialogue with Foucauldian notions of discourse, power/knowledge and governmentality. The importance of social context and interaction as part of a broader communicative repertoire is entirely congruent with a Foucauldian frame in which networks of social relations speak persuasively to discursive *practices* as opposed to mere statements alone.

Thus, it is through this semiotic frame that we envision and locate this article, critically examining the way in which social interactions between coach and athlete are symbolically represented. We consider how this visual representation, conveying a morality of relations and tactile encounters, is socially regulated and explore how this may serve to perpetuate risk-averse practice in sports coaching. A key point of departure for our analysis is the understanding that all discourse and resources for representation are conceived as socially plural, with the potential to produce nuanced interpretations of 'reality' that are always already socially and culturally riven and produced. This approach is in harmony with Barthes's (1977) concept of *polysemy* in which all images are essentially unstable, comprising multiple layers that are sensitive to contextual debate. In this way, our interpretation of cinematic contexts emerges from a cultural reference point that is inevitably partial and

incomplete. Our limited interpretations thus invoke the rich and diverse nature of 'reality', adding value through an intertextuality that connects to everything outside the film: the broader cultural milieu. This is pertinent as we redeploy the concept of genealogy as a means to locate and interpret competing discourses and practices of non-verbal interactions. Through this multimodal frame we show how, in seeking to understand issues around safeguarding in the power-asymmetric context of sports coaching, *Bend it like Beckham* remains a significant cinematic resource. The story is not merely anchored to the time of its making; rather, it is effected contemporaneously in the process of its viewing.

### ***Bend it Like Beckham***

The film combines drama, romance and comedy, and foregrounds association football and the ambition of two young women living in Hounslow, west London to become professional players. Traditionally masculine and male-dominated, football is used as a theme to challenge a range of prominent social issues, including homophobia, gender and cultural stereotyping and, in particular, the role of women in society against a backdrop of conflicting social, cultural, and religious values and practices. The film's title references the renowned footballer David Beckham (then near his peak) and his trademark success in scoring spectacular goals from free kicks, 'bending' the ball at speed around the opponents' defensive wall. The film deploys this emblematically as a mark of excellence, an aspirational target for anyone seeking to become a professional footballer. The story revolves around the friendship of two 18 year-old females, Jess (Jesminder) and Jules (Juliette), from contrasting ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Jess is the daughter of Punjabi-Sikh Indian parents, who prove to have serious qualms as to whether football is a suitable interest or career for their younger daughter. She has a passion for football (and

David Beckham) and often plays in the park with her friend Tony and his mates.

Here she is observed, and her talent for running at speed around opponents with the ball at her feet recognised, by Jules who already plays for the local women's team, Hounslow Harriers. Jules persuades Jess to try out for the team, which is coached by Joe (a man of Irish descent, in his mid- twenties) who is impressed by her skills and recruits her. Subsequently, Jess and Jules become best friends in spite of an emerging tension: both are attracted to Joe. This builds throughout the film, in verbal and non-verbal ways, sparking anxiety, ambiguity and anticipation between the three central characters. As this three-way relationship deepens, the politics of 'touching' (both literally and metaphorically) becomes increasingly prominent and notions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in coach-athlete relationships are rendered ambiguous.

### **Rationale and conceptual frame**

Our selection of *Bend it like Beckham* is significant for two reasons. First, beyond its original high profile and box office success, it has attracted critical and analytic attention from a wide variety of interdisciplinary perspectives and academic areas.

These include those focusing on: the semiotics of cultural difference and cultural translation in cinema (Anjoli, 2006); racialized experiences of gender and identity in women's football (Ratna, 2011); identity politics and postcolonial feminism (Donnell, 2007); the politics of racial performativity (Giardina, 2003); representations of women's sexuality (Caudwell, 2009); and the relationship between motor behaviours and observed actions in famous athletes (Bach and Tipper, 2006). However despite this diverse and eclectic response, none have applied a social semiotic frame to the process of understanding the film's treatment of the politics of touch in coaching.

Thus, building on our previous research experience in the area, by taking a critical

look at the morality of cinematically portrayed tactile encounters in intimate coach-athlete relationships, we present a novel contribution to the field. Secondly, while our choice of *Bend it like Beckham* (released in April 2002) may seem dated, it is entirely deliberate. As Jewitt and Oyama (2001: 136) affirm, 'semiotic resources are at once the products of cultural histories and the cognitive resources we use to create meaning in the production and interpretation of visual and other messages'. This film has particular historical resonance, supporting understanding of the contemporary politics of touching behaviour in sports coaching. Its moral and political genealogy conveys both discontinuity and continuity in relation to a range of prevalent prohibitive discourses of the early 2000s.

In a Foucauldian sense *Bend it like Beckham* can be read to symbolise a type of social authority or 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1979), its resource and potentiality prompting the 'invention' of specific interests and purposes (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001) in a particular cultural context. Thus its fictional status reflects reality's cultural preconceptions and, from a particular 'point of view' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996), simultaneously produces them as naturalised. Cinematic representations of touching thus produce an 'effect of power' (Foucault, 2002a), with a disciplinary function which serves to structure the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1983). This is where the exercise of power, exerted as a mechanism of coercion, serves as a guide to influence action across a field of possibilities by putting in place the possible outcome. Power is thus understood as less an obvious confrontation and more as a subtly nuanced concept of government (Foucault, 2002a: 341). Mapping onto film as a medium and technology of governmentality, visual images may thus prove persuasive in educating people to conduct themselves in particular ways. In turn, the film also conveys a 'relational modality' (Foucault, 2002b: 59) and hence

intertextuality, its conceptual reach cutting across multiple social, cultural and political boundaries and further contributing to the production of a generalised politics of what counts as 'true' (Foucault, 1980). In part this 'regime of truth' is reactive, shaped in the UK sports coaching and child protection context by other pervasive and ubiquitous prohibitions, authoritative statements and policy documents (TSO, 1996a, 1996b; DoH, 1999) and other relevant legislation. Also significant is the inauguration in 2001 of the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) as a department of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, partly funded by national sports organisations.

Collateral developments included the introduction of the Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) under part five, section 113 of the Police Act 1997 ([www.legislation.gov.uk](http://www.legislation.gov.uk)), and the necessity of checks on all adults in a position of authority and care over children or vulnerable others, formally introduced just a month before the release of the film. Thus, in this social and political context *Bend it like Beckham* can be seen to represent a potentially powerful symbolic device. It projects a cinematic representation of the moral ambiguity around touching at a time when panic and fear around intergenerational and power-asymmetric relationships was beginning to escalate and be subject to critical analysis (Piper et al., 2012; Furedi, 2002). However, at this time such uncertainty was being discursively played out with seemingly untroubled authority and confidence, as the impact of disciplinary regulations and guidelines had not yet been recognised.

In what follows we discuss six scenes, in the order they occur in the film. They are selected for the way in which they capture and illuminate elements of the moral ambience and ambiguity to which we refer; they verbally and visually represent and symbolise the apparent tensions and contradictions in touching behaviours between

coach and athletes. The selective nature of the process, in terms of the scenes we have chosen to privilege, is unavoidable. These reflect our 'point of view' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996), or authorial omnipotence that reflexively positions us, constructing a field of action consisting of potential meanings and symbolic relations. Kvale's point (2008: 98) about interviews is relevant, here applied to the context of visual analysis: 'transcripts are not copies or representations of some original reality, they are interpretative constructions that are useful tools for given purposes'. Conceived as a semiotic resource, we recognise that our interpretation of the film can thus be read in a variety of ways, in which interpretations resist any final meaning or fixed ontological status.

## **Social semiotics, interpretation and moral ambiguity**

### ***Selection One***

Following her trial for the team, Jess walks off the football field alongside the coach, Joe, their shoulders brushing together as they move briskly towards the viewer front-on. From this point of view the scene invites maximum audience involvement. We are directly challenged at this early stage to make-meaning of the coach-athlete encounter as that which produces excess, a certain something, a tacit recognition of a possibility suggested if not articulated. Indeed, for a first meeting it is somewhat surprising that coach and athlete are in such close physical proximity, the early contact suggesting ease and possible mutual attraction. The ambiguity of the scene is reinforced by Joe being considerably taller than Jess, the image producing a stark sense of visual *inequality*. Thus, Joe's height differential can be interpreted as a representation of his symbolic power, coach over athlete. This opens the possibility of questioning the potential for future impropriety and exploitation on the one hand,



or moral probity on the other. Either way, such difference invokes a certain 'representational metafunction' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Halliday, 1978), affirming the power and masculinity of the male coach to initiate either a process of becoming more involved with or remaining detached from a less powerful yet apparently willing female subject. As they move off the field a dialogue ensues, with Joe peering down at Jess:

Joe: 'How did it feel out there?'

Jess: 'Brilliant, really, really great'

Joe: 'I've never seen an Indian girl into football'

Jess: 'I didn't even know they had a girls' team here'

At this salient moment, looking to the left of screen Joe provocatively points outwards and with a sparkle in his eye, chants: 'It's all her fault, I used to play for the men's club'. The striking figure of Jules, a similar height to Joe, enters the frame from the left and without breaking stride joins the pair, the three now walking abreast as they proceed off field and towards the camera.

In a practiced way, barely pausing, Joe opens a holdall for Jules to drop two footballs. He continues: 'She used to hang around here whining there's no team for her to play on'. Jules' mouth drops open in playful astonishment at this; a smile envelops an enticing gaze, glances cut across Jess, a shorter and marginalised yet central figure. Visually the scene produces a powerful representational and compositional function: Joe and Jules flanking Jess and talking above (or indeed over) her head, almost as parental figures. The apparent visual chemistry is symbolically produced by a compelling line or vector (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001) running transactively between the lateral gaze and interaction of the two flanking characters. As onlookers we are drawn to this and cannot evade its seduction; the

spatial syntax producing an irresistible symmetry and equality of familiarity between coach and athlete, reinforced through the narrative.

'Whoahhh! I wasn't whining' retorts Jules, she and Joe now unreservedly laughing in an overtly flirtatious way, their bodies symmetrically aligned, matching stride for stride and arms swinging in harmony. Shifting her gaze down towards Jess, whose lowered head conceals a discrete smile, Jules continues: 'Nah, there was nothing here for us girls, I mean there was junior boys stuff, but when he busted his knee (briefly touching her mouth before folding her arms and picking up Joe's attention) he set up a girls' side and he's been on my case ever since'. Glancing at Jess to capture her interest, Joe addresses Jules full-on, chortling: 'You see they made me start at the bottom; you can't get much lower than her'. Again, Jules' mouth drops open with feigned incredulity matched with spontaneous laughter. She retorts: 'You're full of it!' and retreats in an apparently coy manner, looking down, arms folded, pretending to be hurt. She continues, 'Nah, we get as many trophies as the men do'. Joe's gaze now shifts to engage Jess. Her head remains lowered in an attempt to conceal her amusement and perhaps partial embarrassment, as an interloper spoiling a possibly improper over-familiarity between Joe and Jules. Then another salient moment arises, when Jules puts her arm around Jess's shoulder and abruptly pulls her to one side, left of screen and away from Joe. The girls are in profile, turned obliquely away from the audience and facing their coach. Jules asks: 'So, does she pass?' Jules and Joe now fix their gaze downwards on Jess who looks hopefully towards Joe.

Joe: 'Are your folks up for it?'

Jess: 'Yeah they're cool'.

Joe: 'I suppose you'd better come back then! I've gotta go up in the bar and do some real work'.

He playfully punches out towards Jules, making contact with her left shoulder and forcing it back on impact, before swiftly departing off screen to the right. The salience of the 'punch' frames a telling discontinuity: the portrayal of a different sort of physicality, more symbolically brutal. The 'incident' both reasserts Joe's power as a male coach and simultaneously portrays a notion of hegemonic masculinity to displace Jules as a romantic possibility and construct her as 'one of the boys'.

Jules stands smirking and tilting her head to one side, admiring her coach as he moves away:

Jules: 'He likes you'.

Jess: 'Do you think so?'

Jules: 'He asked you back didn't he?'

The scene continues with Jules and Jess discussing football, the tone shifting in Joe's absence.

### ***Selection Two***

Later in the film, following a practise session one evening, the young women leave the clubhouse by the top exit and descend the outside stairs. Jules is the last to leave, but turns quite suddenly and with her back to the audience embraces Joe who is standing, overseeing the players' departure. She places her arms around his neck and mutters something that we cannot quite hear but which conveys a semblance of intimacy. Despite the display of earlier friendliness and/or explicit flirtation captured in selection one, Joe appears not to reciprocate but instead stands motionless, almost statuesque with hands behind his back looking dismissively away from camera. Whilst not uttering a word his body language strongly suggests the need to

create physical distance between himself and Jules. This is a salient moment in terms of sensory modality (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996), of a 'point of view' that is highly 'naturalistic'. It conveys a suggestion that it would be quite inappropriate to reciprocate Jules' intimate embrace and makes a symbolic appeal to a broader intertextual convention, that intimate relations and touch are inappropriate in coach-athlete relationships. Thus, while at one level Joe's behaviour can be interpreted as an odd reaction given the earlier analysis, a different view of his reticence connects with the intertextual influence of self-policing (Piper et al., 2012) enacted in the presence of other team members. In the previous selection, shared intimacy between coach and athletes was constructed as a semi-private encounter, but here it is exhibited publicly. Accordingly, the coach can be seen to be governed (Foucault, 1979) by the 'conduct of conducts' in which personal desires defer to professional responsibilities and hence the reaffirmation of a formal division and distance between coach and athlete.

### ***Selection Three***

This ambiguity is further compounded within the same visual assemblage through immediately cutting to a different scene. Here, Joe can be observed officiating behind Jess and Jules who are performing a practise drill. The young women are chasing a ball moving directly on a path towards the audience a visual framing that beckons attention. The drill is repeated visually several times; on the last occasion Joe appears to tease and/or deliberately provoke the women, who in turn bring him to the ground, smother him and playfully punch him, Joe feigning helplessness. The symbolic juxtaposition of inappropriate touching noted earlier with counter examples of acceptable physical contact serve to frame an intriguing moral ambiguity: that the practice of touching, of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate touch, is

simultaneously continuous and discontinuous. This point is illustrated later at a bus stop, Jules and Jess framed in profile laughing together; Jess pops a question:

‘Jules, you know Joe, do you like him?’ Shrugging, turning away and pretending to be somewhat embarrassed, Jules replies: ‘Nah, he’d get sacked if he was caught shagging one of his players’.

Jess: ‘Really?’

Jules: ‘Sometimes I wish I could find a bloke just like him though, you know, that wasn’t off limits ...’

Jess: ‘I hope I end up marrying an Indian boy like him too’

Jules bursts out laughing and doubles over ...

Jess: ‘Shut up!!’

This dialogue is pertinent in reinforcing Jules’ desire to be sexually intimate with Joe. Yet by skilfully evading the question of whether she actually likes him, she instead takes responsibility and projects a generalised moral imperative (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001) that all coaches should be mindful of moral and professional responsibilities in relation to their athletes. In Foucauldian terms (1979; 1977), the nature of the disciplinary technology (and hence imputed notion of moral probity) constructs a field of action by putting in place the possible outcome: the potential loss of employment and career. While recognising that Joe is ‘off limits’, both young women still appear infatuated with him, or at least the symbolic image of the role he discharges; Jules wishes she could ‘find a bloke just like him’ and Jess hopes to ‘end up marrying an Indian boy like him too’. This joint confession produces a salience (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) that re-emerges in later scenes.

#### ***Selection Four***

A development in the plot is that Jess's parents, with traditional notions of propriety, are not happy with her playing football and finally forbid it. A further contradiction and discontinuity arises during a club trip to play in Germany. One evening Joe and the team are waiting outside their hotel lobby for a taxi to a nightclub. Jess (who has travelled with the team but is believed by her parents to be staying with relatives in London) makes an appearance in a stunning black dress (having been dressed for the part by Jules), enjoying attention. Distracted by the rest of the team, Joe is then alerted to her entrance; the camera moves in on his face as he looks Jess up and down, admiring her and perhaps even metaphorically touching her as a sexual object before shaking the trance and reinforcing the call for a taxi. At the nightclub, Jules beckons Joe to dance several times but Joe refuses and remains steadfast until finally conceding to pressure. The two link hands on the dance floor, moving and touching provocatively, perhaps even inappropriately given the contradictory imperative. Shortly, Joe approaches Jess and invites her to join in the dancing. He holds the hands of both young women as they all dance together, but eventually lets go of Jules to pay Jess more attention. Feeling the effect of alcohol, Jess holds her head and motions to exit the nightclub with Joe quickly following. Outside on the rooftop Jess stumbles but is saved by Joe who puts his arms around her shoulder and waist, bringing her in close to his side and asking if she is alright. Declaring that she had only a couple of glasses of wine, Jess perches against a wall before complaining about her head and the smoke inside. The two are now in very close proximity, Joe peering down on Jess in a manner that is almost predatory. A dialogue ensues, referring back to an earlier scene where Joe had intervened on behalf of Jess with her parents, attempting to allay their fears regarding her footballing ambitions.

Jess: 'That was so brilliant the way you came to my house. You were brave enough to face my mum. Your dad can't be as mad as her'. Joe retorts: 'Your mam's a barrel of laughs compared to my dad'.

Stroking Jess's hair Joe continues: 'I don't need to feel close to my family Jess. I don't need you to feel sorry for me'.

The scene then cuts to Jules who has arrived outside and is looking positively horrified. Joe and Jess move closer oblivious to Jules' covert presence. Looking into each other's eyes, it is Jess that makes the first move, motioning forward to attempt a kiss with Joe before Jules intervenes shouting 'you bitch'. The kiss is thwarted and Jess and Joe are left feeling awkward with Jules storming back inside the nightclub.

The salience of this scene is contained in the way that all three characters can be seen to transgress the generalised moral imperative noted earlier, by disregarding the professional distance expected between coach and athlete. Indeed it appears that, away from the immediate context of football, coach-athlete boundaries are reciprocally relaxed. Tellingly, the young women are both 18 years of age and therefore technically adults who are able to make their own judgements concerning what counts as appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. Even so, moral ambiguity prevails in terms of the nature, role and salience of intertextuality. Some observers (Brackenridge, 2001 and others) argue from the 'point of view' of Kant's categorical imperative (Acton, 1970), that irrespective of particular circumstances it is *de facto* always wrong for a professional in a position of power and responsibility to become intimately involved with an athlete; to ignore the imperative would constitute a breach of conduct and possible sexual exploitation. However, in this view the athlete is

always positioned as subordinate in the relationship and conceived as vulnerable; assumptions which can be strongly questioned on many levels (Johansson, 2013).

### ***Selection Five***

This point is especially resonant given the perspective of the young women, as symbolically represented several scenes later. Following a rift between the two women over the nightclub 'incident', Jess visits Jules at home. There is a frosty atmosphere between them and Jess's face appears full of fear and trepidation as she anticipates delivering an apology.

Jess: 'Look Jules I feel really bad about what happened'.

Jules: 'Yeah well you should', turning her head away and to profile in disapproval.

Jess: 'I'm sorry, I don't want you to be in a strop with me'

Looking directly at the audience to engage our judgement, Jules retorts: 'I'm not in a strop'

Jess: 'But it was a mistake, I didn't know what I was doing'

Jules looks on with venom and disgust: 'I can't believe you kissed him'.

Jess, looking somewhat confused: 'I didn't'

Jules: 'Yeah right, Jess I know what I saw, you knew he was off-limits ... don't pretend to be so innocent - you knew exactly how I felt about him'

Jess: 'You told me you didn't even like him, now you're acting as though you're in love with him'.

Jules: 'You don't know the meaning of love. You've really hurt me Jess. That's all there is to it, you've betrayed me'

Jess: 'So that's it?'

Jules: 'Yeah, that's it. Bye!'



In this encounter it is interesting that Jules once again employs the expression 'off-limits' in relation to Joe. Previously, she had used it to suggest he was unobtainable precisely because he is the coach. Now, however, the meaning is subverted to suggest that he is not so much 'off-limits' as to be unavailable to Jess, since Jules tacitly discloses she is also infatuated with Joe – 'you knew exactly how I felt about him'. As a mode of representation the scene has high modality (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001). Jules' facial expression is replete with sorrow and woe, which despite her tacit admission produces an 'effect of power', which potentially draws the audience into her narrative and thus onto her side. Moreover, the discursive slippage serves to underscore the point that none of the central characters is able to fully maintain a consistent moral line throughout the film, which contributes to its ambiguity. This point is supported in our final extract in which Joe, in the aftermath of the nightclub debacle, articulates a stricter professional line.

### ***Selection Six***

Following an incident during a tournament match where Jess is fouled by an opponent and her shirt torn, she becomes involved in an altercation with the offending player, who calls her a 'Pakki'. The two players end up pushing each other and this results in Jess being sent off for violent conduct, the referee not having heard the racist abuse. In the changing room after the match, Joe admonishes Jess, shouting while aggressively pointing in her face: 'What the hell's wrong with you? I don't wanna see anything like that from you ever again. Do you hear me? We're lucky they're not suspending players in this tournament'. At this point he turns to commend and applaud the rest of the team for their win and performance, before sharply exiting the changing room. Jess storms out after him: 'Why did you yell at me like that? You knew the ref was out of order'. Joe continues to walk away

dismissively with Jess in pursuit. Turning and fiercely pointing, Joe snaps: 'You could have cost us the tournament!' Jess, becoming tearful, replies: 'It wasn't my fault, you didn't have to shout at me'. Facing Jess front on, both now in profile to the audience, Joe emphatically states: 'I am your coach, I have to treat you the same as everyone else'. Holding out his hands in front of her, in a plea for empathy while looking passionately into her eyes, he continues: 'Look Jess I saw what happened, she fouled you, she tugged your shirt, you just over-reacted that's all'. Jess: 'It's not all. She called me a Pakki, but I guess you wouldn't understand what that feels like, would you?' Holding both hands to his chest Joe sighs: 'Oh yes, I'm Irish. Of course I understand what that feels like'. Then, putting both hands on Jess's shoulders, he pulls her to an intimate embrace, her nose pressed closely into his chest while fighting back tears.

Quite how we, the audience, are supposed to reconcile Joe's claim to treat Jess the same as everyone else, while only moments later pulling her to an intimate embrace, presents an intriguing negative and moral quandary. The obvious contradiction is symbolic of the ambiguous tone throughout, producing corollary implications for the way in which relationships between coaches and athletes both reflect and construct meaning in real life situations.

## **Conclusion**

After a successful end to the season, the film concludes with the reconciled Jess and Jules being selected for football scholarships at a university in the US, a key step towards a professional career; Jess's parents have accepted her choice and intention. Jess and Joe admit to each other they are romantically involved and plan to confront Jess's parents with this when she returns at Christmas. Thus in 2002 the

cinematic conventions of a feel-good romantic comedy, with a happy ending, were met. It is no criticism of the film to note that the tensions and contradictions around touch and intimacy, on which the narrative had played, and which we have sought to explore, are left unresolved or simply avoided. Significantly, the burgeoning relationship between Joe and Jess is permitted only once she has moved on and he has ceased to be her coach. In previous decades this may have seemed less of an issue, with high profile female athletes marrying their coaches (Jackie Joyner in 1986, Isabelle Duchesnay in 1991, Paula Radcliffe in 2001). However, by the time the film was released, for a coach-athlete relationship to reach that stage would have required the contravention of significant guidelines on appropriate behaviour and socio-physical distance, and would have attracted negative responses and possible sanction. Although intimate relations between coach and athletes above the age of consent are not prohibited in law, they are effectively forbidden in many sports. Olympic champion cyclist Victoria Pendleton risked her relationship with her governing body when, aged 27, she courted and married her coach, and suffered hostility (McRae and Pendleton, 2012). Extreme anxiety around child abuse has extended into even adult athlete-coach relationships, and while rationalisations for this proscriptive approach are offered (e.g. power imbalances, age differences, contrary responsibilities), the process is based on the infantilisation of the athletes (usually women) who cannot be trusted with agency and are always considered victims.

Viewing the film in 2015 following the implementation of draconian 'no touching' and 'no relationship' guidelines by sports governing bodies, we see it through a different lens. In spite of the suggestion that it avoids confronting the tensions and contradictions it portrays, it remains notable that it shows the coach-athlete

relationship as human and normal. Joe is not an automaton; his performance varies over time and between contexts, and his athletes respond in human ways. Indeed, were the film to be produced today it might be condemned as irresponsible by the CPSU and others, as Joe acts in ways which today would be considered to be evidence of 'grooming'. Thus he would be seen as dangerous, improper and punishable. However, here is a coach who seems to put the wellbeing and development of his charges before self-protection. When Jess is unwilling to be seen in shorts (for cultural reasons and because her knee is scarred from a childhood accident with fire) Joe sits alone in the stand with her and compares her burn marks with his own heavily scarred post-operative knee. Later, when she appears to have sprained an ankle, alone on the edge of the field he removes her sock and manipulates her foot. Both actions would cause apoplexy today; he is alone, unwitnessed, and risks allegations of abuse. Yet in the film the characters carry these events off in a relatively relaxed way; the coach is acting like a coach and, whatever might happen away from the training ground, it is accepted as normal and positive. In this sense, watching *Bend it Like Beckham* offers a reminder of a world which we have lost but that, with some clearer thinking and good sense, we may choose to find again.

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